

## Introduction

### *Have This Mind: A Primer on the Cruciform Life*

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians poses a riddle. Paul is imprisoned, chained 24-hours a day to Roman imperial guards (Phil. 1:12–13). His life hangs in the balance, so that the sentence he awaits may free him to be reunited with his beloved brothers and sisters at the church in Philippi (Phil. 1:25–26; 2:24), or it may condemn him to death by execution (Phil. 1:20). Beyond the walls of the prison, Paul has somehow made enemies who seek to afflict him by preaching the gospel as Paul's rival—not out of a genuine love for Christ, but out of selfish ambition to advance themselves at Paul's expense (Phil. 1:15–17).

Regarding the church at Philippi, Paul has very little reason to be encouraged about the progress of the church that he himself planted a decade earlier. Instead, he has received word that his beloved congregation is coming apart at the seams, since the Philippians have begun living in a way that stands contrary to the demands of the gospel (Phil. 1:27), acting out of selfish ambition and conceit (Phil. 2:3), working only half-heartedly toward their spiritual growth (Phil. 2:12), flirting with temptation toward the twin evils of legalism (Phil. 3:2–3) and licentious living (Phil. 3:18–19), and permitting open conflict to persist in their midst (Phil. 4:2–3).

Given Paul's difficult, harrowing, anxious circumstances, as well as the emotional and spiritual anguish from his pastoral heart for the Philippians, we would understand if we found him bitter, complaining, and nervous in this letter. But in fact, we find nothing of the sort. Where Paul's chains chafe against his skin and bruise his frail body, and where enemies oppose him in his ministry, he nevertheless rejoices (Phil. 1:18). Where he lives every moment of his life under the threat of the death penalty, his confidence in his coming salvation only increases (Phil. 1:19–20). Where Paul is anxious about the spiritual growth of the Philippians, he rejoices over the financial gift they have sent to him as a sign of their renewed concern for him (Phil. 4:10).

How could any human being possibly respond to such an extraordinary degree of suffering with such an unwavering demeanor of contentedness? What is the secret behind Paul's overflowing joy? How could Paul possibly have the emotional energy to exhort the Philippians to rejoice in the midst of *their* suffering, given all the suffering that *he* must endure? Paul's outlook, attitude, and behavior represent a complicated riddle that cannot be unravelled easily—or, even *naturally*. Human nature simply does not provide the depth of emotional and spiritual resources that Paul draws on to write this letter.

## The Cruciform Life

Paul writes his letter to the Philippians, then, to clarify how a mortal human being can indeed respond in a supernatural way to suffering: *through Christ*. The Christ hymn in Philippians 2:6–11 functions as the theological and thematic climax to this letter, providing the example that *Paul*

*himself* is following as he asks the Philippians to follow *his* example (Phil. 3:17). Paul's example may have *posed* the riddle of the cruciform life, but only Christ's humility, life, death, resurrection, and exaltation can *solve* the riddle. If the first part of the letter largely raises overarching questions of how Paul could possibly rejoice in such circumstances—and, on what basis the Philippians could ever hope to live up to Paul's example—the Christ hymn provides the model for such living in Christ's absolute, self-sacrificing mindset. In our Lord's humility to the point of death on the cross, Paul provides both the example and the power for the cruciform life that God calls us to live. Then, Paul explains how God takes what Jesus has done and works it into us through the power of the Holy Spirit in the gospel (Phil. 2:12–18).

Paul could perhaps have ended his letter with the Christ hymn, since the Christ hymn solves the riddle of the first part of the letter. Instead, Paul extends the example of what Jesus Christ has done into a variety of applications as he teaches us what kind of cruciform (cross-shaped) lives that *we* ought to live. In every section of the last half of the letter, Paul pulls out and reworks the themes and words from the Christ-hymn, urging believers to have in them the mind that was in Christ Jesus. Christ leads us to walk in self-sacrificial love and obedience to the glory of God and the mission of Christ in the world. Even so, Paul is careful to explain that we cannot follow the example of Christ by our own power. Instead, we need Christ to give us the fullness of his resurrection power through the Holy Spirit in order to comfort us, encourage us, and enable us to lay down our lives just as our Lord did—and, more immediately, just as Paul is demonstrating. We cannot merely read approvingly about what Christ did for us at the cross without any impact on our lives; rather, the cross of Christ serves as a model for our own lives. As Kevin Vanhoozer puts it, “Christians are not simply ‘people of the book’ but ‘people of the cross.’”<sup>1</sup>

Paul's supernatural joy both puzzles and inspires us. The fact that we look upon his attitude with curiosity demonstrates how greatly we need to devote our attention in study to what he writes to the Philippians. Our goal is not primarily to see Paul, but to see *Christ's* cruciform mindset. But, Paul explicitly urges us to imitate him (Phil. 3:17) in the way that he has appropriated Christ's cruciform mindset for himself. In an age that worships immediate gratification and unrestrained pleasure-seeking, we desperately need to gain the mind of Christ as we learn to take up our cross and follow him. It is my prayer *first* that this commentary will help you wrestle with the soaring gospel of Jesus Christ, who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality of God something to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant and humbling himself in obedience all the way to the point of death. *Second*, I pray that as you worship our crucified, yet exalted, Lord, you will grow to gain more of the mindset that Christ himself had, embracing the costly—yet glorious—implications of his gospel in every facet of our lives.

## Background

Before diving into the contents of this letter that Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, it is helpful to review the history of Paul's first journey to Philippi and the story of how Paul originally went about planting that church. Philippi was a city in the ancient region of Macedonia, located on the northeastern side of modern-day Greece. We read about the initial missionary journey into Macedonia in Acts 16. At the beginning of Acts 16, Timothy joined up with Paul and Silas for their missionary journey (Acts 16:1–5). Timothy, then, was present when the gospel was first preached in

Philippi, which may explain why Timothy is included as one of the senders of this letter (Phil. 1:1). While the original intention of the missionaries had been to preach the gospel in Asia (that is, Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey), the Holy Spirit forbade them from doing so (Acts 16:6), and the Spirit of Jesus stopped them from traveling further along their intended route (Acts 16:7). Instead, Paul received a vision in the night of a Macedonian man pleading with him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9), and the missionaries obeyed this vision immediately (Acts 16:10), leading them first to Philippi (Acts 16:11).

Now, before we discuss the history of the spread of the gospel in Philippi, we should perhaps note that the establishment of several critical early churches in Macedonia came about not because of the plans and strategies of the missionaries themselves, but *in spite* of their actual intentions. They planned to go one direction, but the Holy Spirit prevented them in ways that Luke records in unusually strong language: “forbidden...did not allow” (Acts 16:6–7). The purpose of these setbacks was not to prevent the expansion of the kingdom of Jesus on earth, but rather to redirect the efforts of God’s servants toward spreading the gospel into cities like Philippi, Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9), Berea (Acts 17:10–15), and, as they made their way farther into Greece, cities like Athens (Acts 17:16–34) and Corinth (Acts 18:1–17). Paul’s letters to these unintentionally planted churches make up five of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. What encouragement the example of Macedonia should give to us when it seems that God is closing doors for our own ministry!

Where the Spirit of God prevented ministry in Asia, the same Spirit flung open doors in Philippi, beginning at a “place of prayer” (Acts 16:13). These places of prayer were used by Jewish believers for worship instead of full-blown synagogues when there were fewer than ten Jewish worshipers in the city.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the Holy Spirit sent these missionaries to a place with very few people who had any knowledge of the truth of the living God at all! Nevertheless, we read first of the conversion of Lydia, a wealthy “seller of purple goods” (Acts 16:14): “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Afterward, Lydia was baptized along with her household, and she offered her home to the missionaries as a place to stay (Acts 16:15).

Now, the place of prayer made perfect sense as a starting point for the preaching of the gospel in Philippi. From here on out, the spread of the gospel through the rest of Philippi took a providential turn just as unlikely (humanly speaking) as when the Holy Spirit forbade the missionaries from preaching in Asia Minor. God is determined to reveal that his mission into Philippi arises exclusively from his own sovereign decrees, and not by the schemes of his people. Accordingly, the next convert to Christianity in Philippi was not another wealthy, religious person, but the exact opposite: a demon-possessed slave girl whose owners used her as a fortune teller to make profit for themselves (Acts 16:16). This slave girl followed Paul and “us” (Acts 16:17; Luke, the author of Acts, was apparently present on this mission as well), crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17)—a claim she repeated for many days until Paul became so annoyed at her that he commanded the demon in her to come out in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 16:18). Problematically for the owners of the fortune-telling slave, this meant that the girl had lost her value, so they dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates of Philippi, ultimately getting the two beaten, attacked, and thrown into prison (Acts 16:19–24).

Once again, God chooses to work in the most unlikely of circumstances. While Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, drawing the attention of the rest of the prisoners (Acts 16:25), an earthquake struck, opening all the doors of the prison and the bonds of the prisoners (Acts

16:26). The jailer awoke, and, believing that he had lost all of the prisoners under his responsibility, he began to kill himself until Paul told him not to, since everyone was still there (Acts 16:27–28). The jailer, trembling with fear, fell down before Paul and Silas, begging, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30), and the two respond with the simple gospel: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31). The missionaries preached further to him and to his whole household (Acts 16:32), and, after the jailer washed the wounds of Paul and Silas, the jailer and his family were baptized (Acts 16:33). Everyone present rejoiced and feasted together that the jailer had come to faith in God (Acts 16:34).

The next day, the magistrates decided to let Paul and Silas go, but Paul (presumably to raise fear of further oppression of Christians in Philippi) pointed out that they have beaten and jailed two Roman citizens, which was a serious miscarriage of the legal process in the Roman world (Acts 16:35–37). So, the magistrates came, apologized to Paul and to Silas, and escorted them out of the prison, asking them to leave the city (Acts 16:38–39). Before moving on to Thessalonica, Paul and Silas “visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed” (Acts 16:40).

Thus, in a relatively short stay, Paul and his missionary companions planted the beginning of the church at Philippi. Over the course of time, this church became one of his closest, most beloved congregations, and Paul’s warmth flows through his letter to the Philippians. Without further ado, let us take up that letter and read, praying that God will form in us the same cruciform mind that Christ had throughout his self-emptying incarnation, his life in the form of a servant, a his humble obedience all the way to death on a cross.

May God bless you richly as you study his word!

## Notes

1. Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 380.
2. Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 5.